

Field Marshal Slim—Theoretical Thinking and the Impact of Theory on Campaign Planning

**A Monograph
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Abstract

Field Marshal Slim—Theoretical Thinking and the Impact of Theory on Campaign Planning by Major Shawn P. Steele, U.S. Army, 49 pages.

Field Marshall Viscount Slim holds a special place in modern military history. He soundly defeated the Imperial Japanese Army in Burma in 1945, retaking the strategically important Burma Road, and safeguarding the Chinese Theater from sure culmination. By all accounts, Slim is a military genius, having achieved this notable victory even after the Japanese 15th Army pushed Allied troops all the way back to India. The historical records attribute Slim's success to his superior ability to lead soldiers in combat, but they tell only half the story. By tracing Slim's implicit process of theoretical thinking, using an *observe, interpret, hypothesize, test, and prescribe action* framework, this story demonstrates that Slim's genius came from a combination of his abilities to lead and think theoretically. Specifically, in the case of Slim, his ability to think theoretically afforded him the opportunity to develop a new operational approach—a paradigm shift of sorts—and his leadership made it possible to motivate his men to employ that approach. The author asserts that it is the presence of these two abilities in a single man that make him a superior military commander.

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Introduction

Background

Between 1939 and 1945, much of the world's attention focused on the conflict between the Axis and Allies on the battlefields of Eastern Europe. However, during this same time, men were also fighting in the lesser-known Far East Theater of Burma. The Burma campaign was a vital component in the Allied strategy to stop the advancing Imperial Japanese Army, maintaining strategic supply routes to China and causing Japan to divert forces from other locations in the Pacific.¹ The man whose actions turned this campaign to victory from the brink of total defeat was Field Marshal William Joseph Slim.

Most people know Slim as an inspirational leader; some even consider his leadership as the central component for the victory achieved against the Japanese.² Indeed, his ability to lead was a necessary component for success, but not the only one. Slim's role in the Far East Theater started amidst a crisis,³ causing him to adopt a directed operational approach provided by his commander, General Alexander.⁴ This constrained Slim's thinking and limited his ability to achieve his nation's strategic aims, and those of the United States and China.⁵ In fact, his commitment to Alexander's approach led to a tragic defeat.⁶

¹ S.Woodburn Kirby, *The War against Japan: Volume II India's most Dangerous Hour* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1958), 57.

² Toh Boon Ho, "Transforming an Army: Military Leadership and Military Transformation in the British and Indian Armies," *Journal of The Singapore Armed Forces* 32, no. 3 (2006): 64.

³ Ian Lyall Grant, and Tamayama, *Burma 1942: The Japanese Invasion* (St Martin's Square, Chichester, West Sussex: Zampi Press, 1999), 193; Robert Lyman, *Slim, Master of War: Burma and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (UK: Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2004), 18; William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory* (London: PAPERMAC, 1987), 23.

⁴ Eric Morris, "The Uncommon Commoner," *Military History Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (1995): 21.

⁵ S.Woodburn Kirby, *The War against Japan: Volume II India's most Dangerous Hour*, 147; William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory* (London: PAPERMAC, 1987), 24; Daniel P. Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes: The Indian Army in the Burma Campaign* (CT: Praeger, 2003), 72.

⁶ Morris, 21.

Others claim that Slim is a military genius / superior commander predominantly based upon assessments of his leadership qualities. However, even with Slim's superior military leadership, he had difficulty achieving success using other people's flawed approaches. The author asserts that superior leadership is necessary, but insufficient for genius. Leadership alone—at the tactical level—can produce victory on the battlefield, but success at the operational and strategic levels requires leaders to think theoretically. Slim's genius comes from this ability not only to lead, but also to develop a new operational approach through thinking theoretically.

The Problem

This monograph seeks to address the problem of the apparent gap in military knowledge regarding a commander's ability to think theoretically. Neither U.S. Army professional military education nor contemporary U.S. military doctrine emphasizes the role of theoretical thinking for military leaders. Consequently, operational planners and commanders tend to treat theoretical thinking as an activity limited to the Understand and Visualize portions of Mission Command or in the application of the Army Design Methodology, as opposed to an ever-present ability exercised by commanders.⁷ Thus, the gap in military knowledge regarding the commander's ability to think theoretically represents an obstacle to decision-making and a limiting factor in the development of operational leaders.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose this monograph seeks to achieve is first to add to the body of military knowledge regarding decision-making and operational leadership. Next, it seeks to underscore the influence that theoretical thinking has on those applications. Lastly, it intends to broaden the cognitive tools available to operational planners and commanders by examining a case where the

⁷ U.S. Army, *Operations*, Field Manual 3.0, Change 1 (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2011), 3-2.

commander thought theoretically and set conditions favorable for conflict resolution by changing operational approaches and leading his organization through that change.

Importance

This study demonstrates its importance in four fundamental ways. First, it identifies a critical gap in contemporary military thought regarding theoretical thinking. Second, it reveals the influence this gap has on the applications of decision-making and operational leadership. Third, it addresses that gap with a historical example of an operation where the commander developed a new operational approach through thinking theoretically. Fourth, Slim's case provides an example for future military leaders to assess the positive influence of theoretical thinking on the development of a new operational approach.

Theoretical Framework

A singular theoretical framework provides the logical context for this monograph. Using a five-step process—Observe, Interpret, Hypothesize, Test, and Prescribe Action—helps in understanding this logic and will greatly assist readers. Three primary schools of thought inform our model: the Scientific Method as described by Paul Reynolds, the OODA Loop as devised by John Boyd, and the Sense-making Epistemology as proposed by Karl Wieck.

The first school of thought comes from Paul Reynolds book, *A Primer in Theory Construction*. Reynolds outlines a model comprising five tenets of sound scientific information in order to promote the responsible gathering of scientific knowledge. The first tenet is a method of organization and categorization, also known as a typology. This is the process of placing like information into organized and classified categories for the purpose of explaining an observed phenomenon, using two criterion—exhaustiveness and mutual exclusion. Next are the two characteristics of prediction and explanation. These two characteristics are closely related except for temporal perspectives. If the scientific knowledge or observed phenomenon can be used to

explain what happened or to predict future occurrence, it can be used to organize and classify the observed information. This observing and classifying through explanation or prediction supports the achievement of the next characteristic of sound scientific knowledge / information— understanding. Reynolds explains that understanding is achieved, when there is the existence of a causal mechanism, i.e., when an independent variable creates a response in a dependent variable. It is the reaction in the relationship between variables and the synthesis of the other characteristics of typology, explanation, and prediction that creates understanding. The last characteristic Reynolds discusses is—control— the ability to use the observed phenomenon and change variables to elicit a predicted and desired response.⁸ Taken as a whole, Reynold’s method generally flows from observation to control: (1) separating the important from the interesting; (2) dissecting the important; (3) establishing casual linkages; (4) separating what can be changed in the system from what cannot.

The second school of thought comes from John Boyd’s military model, the Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act, or “OODA” Loop. Boyd developed the OODA Loop to help explain the implicit mental process pilots undergo during aerial combat. Other organizations throughout the military now use the OODA Loop as a one of many general models to aid in the decision-making process. The first step of the loop, observation, requires scanning the environment and gathering information from it. After scanning the environment, the decision maker orients and uses the information to form a mental image of the circumstances. Synthesizing the data into information, the decision maker places the information into its proper context to assist in the decision. Orientation helps to turn information into knowledge where the decision-maker can leverage the knowledge to make sound predictions. Using the knowledge and possibilities derived from orientation, the decision-maker considers options and selects a subsequent course of action. Once the decision is made, the decision-maker then acts to carry out the conceived decision, the results

⁸ Paul Davidson Reynolds, *A Primer in Theory Construction* (MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1971), 3-10.

of the action is observed, and the process starts over.⁹ As a model, Boyd's method also generally flows from observation to control: (1) identifying key elements; (2) creating a mental model; (3) considering options; (4) testing the system through action.

The third school of thought comes from Karl E. Weick and Kathleen M. Sutcliffe's epistemological study on Sensemaking. In their article *Organizing and the Process of Sensemaking*, the authors describe how medical professionals undergo an implicit process of creating meaning during life and death situations, where rapid decisions save lives. The sensemaking process starts with *noticing* and *bracketing*, where individuals use previous knowledge and models to ascribe meaning to observed phenomena.¹⁰ Individuals ascribe meaning to these observations by giving them a label. This labeling facilitates an individual's ability to categorize and associate the phenomena, thereby develop deeper meaning.¹¹ The process then deepens meaning by comparing current observations to historical ones, identifying consistencies and inconsistencies over time. The sensemaking process then leads to a presumption where individuals establish a connection between their newly labeled observation and their extant internal knowledgebase.¹² Subsequently, the sensemaking process takes on a social and systematic posture, building deeper individual and broader shared meaning through discussion with others. This discursive action may confirm or discredit the individual meaning created by the Sensemaker. The last step in Sensemaking is action. This action comes by addressing what is happening and how to change the expected outcome. In its entirety, Weick and Sutcliffe's method also generally flows from observation to control: (1) observing, (2) labeling, (3) identifying

⁹ Performance, Learning, Leadership, & Knowledge, <http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/leadership/ooda.html> (accessed March 13, 2012); Frans P.B. Osinga, *Science, Strategy and War: The Strategic Theory of John Boyd* (New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2007), 231.

¹⁰ Karl E. Weick and Kathleen M. Sutcliffe, "Organizing and the Process of Sensemaking," *Organization Science* 16, no. 4 (July/August 2005): 411.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 412.

relationships through reflection, (4) developing proposed meaning, (5) establishing shared meaning through explicit articulation, and (6) acting on the new understanding.

These models are useful in general terms, but are too peculiar to their discipline to be useful here. Synthesizing their core concepts allows for a more abstract, functioning model, which the author identifies as Observe, Interpret, Hypothesize, Test, and Prescribe Action. This paper uses these fundamental elements to assist in making Slim's implicit theoretical thinking explicit.

Research Questions

Theoretical thinking, in many of its applications, is an extremely disciplined and explicit process. However, Slim did not execute his theoretical thinking in an explicit manner. This raises the questions: *What observations did Slim make about his situation? How did Slim go about interpreting those observations? What hypothesis or model did Slim develop from that interpretation? How did Slim test his hypothesis? What actions did Slim prescribe from the results of his tests?* The lessons learned from answering these questions are relevant to today's leaders in that by establishing Slim's use of theoretical thinking and linking that ability to success at the operational level, we reveal a key component of successful operational and even strategic military leaders. Using these guiding questions, the author will take Slim's implicit process of theoretical thinking and make it explicit.

Hypothesis

As a starting point for further investigation and based upon only cursory knowledge of the situation, the author offers the following suppositions for the proposed research questions. Slim likely made observations, including the condition of his own organization, the proficiency of the enemy, and the effects of the environment on all forces. Based upon these observations, Slim probably interpreted the different relationships between the Japanese and Allied soldiers and the

jungle environment. From this interpretation, Slim possibly hypothesized that improving his own organization's administrative capabilities and relationship to the jungle environment would have positive impact on his ability to take the fight to the Japanese. Testing this hypothesis, Slim likely restructured his organization to improve administrative and operational function, setting favorable conditions for offensive action against the Japanese. After successful testing of this hypothesis, Slim expectedly prescribed additional organizational reform to continue to increase operational efficiency and effectiveness.

Organization of Study

This study contains five parts. Part 1 consists of administrative material, including an abstract and introduction. Part 2 comprises a review of extant military literature on Slim. Part 3 contains methodological material, including an explanation of case study selection, measurement criteria, and data sources. Part 4 conveys the case study of the Burma Campaign. Part 5 concludes the study with analysis of findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

Extant Literature

Introduction

This chapter presents the reasoning and organization behind this study, highlighting extant military thought regarding a commander's ability to think theoretically. This review demonstrates that U.S. military doctrine emphasizes the role of conceptual thought and creative thinking in the operations process. Furthermore, doctrine tends to treat theoretical thinking as a finite activity within the larger operational planning process, instead of as a commander's inherent and ever-present ability. It is this lack of appreciation for the relationship between theoretical thinking and leadership that forms the gap in current military thought and action.

Current Military Doctrine

Three concepts in contemporary U.S. military doctrine are applicable to our discussion. First, is the warfighting function of Mission Command, as explained in *Unified Land Operations*. Second, is the Army Design Methodology, as outlined in *The Operations Process*. Third, is the concept of Military Leadership, as described in *Army Leadership*.

Mission Command

United States Army commanders use Mission Command and leadership during the execution of military operations to achieve success. The 2011 U.S. Army capstone manual *Mission Command*, defines Mission Command as:

the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of full spectrum operations. It is commander-led and blends the art of command and the science of control to integrate the warfighting functions to accomplish the mission.¹³

In both the philosophy and warfighting function of Mission Command, the commander plays a central role. Using Mission Command Tasks of *understand*, *visualize*, *describe*, *lead*, and *assist*, the commander guides his unit through the operations process and ensures a shared understanding of the goals and objectives. The first two activities in the model—*understand* and *visualize*—emphasize the use of creative and critical thinking. This emphasis implies the importance of theoretical thinking in planning Army operations. However, current doctrine devotes only three paragraphs to critical and creative thinking abilities,¹⁴ while devoting two chapters to the activities required for the understand and visualization tasks. One clear example of this treatment is paragraph 1-31, where doctrine addresses the role of *Design* in the Mission

¹³ U.S. Army, *Mission Command*, Field Manual 6.0 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2011), 1-2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-6 .

Command warfighting function.¹⁵ *Design* is another activity or tool that commanders use in conceptual or theoretical thinking. The argument is not a matter of whether or not the U.S. Army believes in theoretical thinking; but rather the emphasis placed on it as an activity versus an ever-present ability.

Army Design Methodology

The U.S. Army Design Methodology helps commanders analyze the environment and its effects on a problem.¹⁶ In the 2010 U.S. Army doctrinal publication, *The Operations Process*, the current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Martin Dempsey, described *Design* as “a critical and creative thinking methodology to help commanders understand the environment, analyze problems, and consider potential approaches so they can exploit opportunities, identify vulnerabilities, and anticipate transitions during a campaign.”¹⁷ In these brief words, General Dempsey succinctly captures the essence of the *Army Design Theory*. Indeed, *Design* assists the commander and his staff to understand complex, ill-structured problems before attempting to address them using a more detailed military planning process such as Troop Leading Procedures (for small-size units), or the more deliberate Military Decision-Making Process (for larger, more complex units).

To employ the *Design Theory*, doctrine urges commanders to consider three main frames—the Operational Environment, the Problem, and the Operational Approach. The Operational Environment Frame analyzes the context of the situation in accordance with guidance from the higher headquarters.¹⁸ The Problem Frame assists the commander to understand and

¹⁵ Ibid., 1-6.

¹⁶ U.S. Army, *The Operations Process*, Field Manual 5.0, Change 1, 3-2.

¹⁷ U.S. Army, *The Operations Process*, Field Manual 5.0 (Washington D.C.: Headquarters Department of The Army, 2010), Foreword.

¹⁸ Ibid., 3-8.

isolate the root problem, rather than its symptoms.¹⁹ The Operational Approach helps commanders to develop a broad conceptual plan capable of achieving the desired endstate.²⁰

Using these three frames, the *Design* process facilitates four primary goals. First, *Design* seeks to understand ill-structured problems.²¹ Second, *Design* strives to anticipate change and prepares to address it.²² Third, *Design* seeks to create opportunity.²³ Fourth, *Design* seeks to recognize and to manage transitions during operations.²⁴

Notably, the Army appears to have moved away from *Design Theory*. The latest changes to *The Operations Process* (2011), removed the Army Design Methodology, but maintain the four goals of *Design*. Despite its transitional place in Army doctrine, the value of *Design Theory* persists.

Military Leadership

The 2006 U.S. Army doctrinal publication, *Army Leadership*, defines military leadership as “the process of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation while operating to accomplish the mission and improving the organization.”²⁵ Put plainly, influencing is the ability to get others to perform actions necessary to accomplish the mission. Military leaders achieve this by providing clear, sound guidance on the task to perform. In the case of unit commanders, this information appears as the commander’s intent. Merely guiding others towards a goal is not enough to achieve victory in military operations. Leaders must also align the desires of subordinates and peers to achieve the larger goals of the organization. Using motivation,

¹⁹ Ibid., 3-10.

²⁰ Ibid., 3-11.

²¹ Ibid., 3-2.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 3-3.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ U.S. Army, *Army Leadership*, Field Manual 6-22, 1-2.

leaders are able to inspire the desire in others to pursue and achieve the unit's larger aim or goals.²⁶

Methodology

Introduction

The following section explains the rationale for selecting the historical case of Field Marshall Viscount Slim during his Burma Campaign from 1942 to 1945 as a means of filling the gap in military knowledge regarding a commander's ability to think theoretically. Additionally, it addresses important concepts unique to this case study in order to draw attention to points that will appear in the conclusion. Lastly, this section includes a brief description of the data sources considered, specifically informative secondary sources and important primary source biographies.

Research Method

The primary research method in this monograph is "structured, focused comparison." This method helps analyze the concept of thinking theoretically "in ways that would draw the explanations of each case of a particular phenomenon into a broader, more complex theory."²⁷

Alexander George and Andrew Bennett explained this method in *Case Studies and Theory*

Development in the Social Science:

The method and logic of structured, focused comparison is simple and straightforward. The method is "structured" in that the researcher writes general questions that reflect the research objective and that these questions are asked of each case under study to guide and standardize data collection, thereby making systematic comparison and cumulation of the findings of the cases possible.

The method is "focused" in that it deals only with certain aspects of the historical cases examined. The requirements for structure and focus apply equally to individual cases since they may later be joined by additional cases.²⁸

²⁶ Ibid., 1-3.

²⁷ Alexander George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 67.

²⁸ Ibid., 19.

Selection of Case

There are five main motivations for selecting this case. First, the case of Field Marshall Viscount Slim's Burma Campaign provides a good example of operational art, or "the pursuit of strategic objectives, in whole or in part, through the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose."²⁹ Second, the case highlights a commander who demonstrates a keen grasp of both leadership and theoretical thinking. Third, this case provides an excellent example of implicit theoretical thinking and its effects on campaign development through time. Indeed, few modern military campaigns possess Burma's continuity of leadership, where Slim remained in command to achieve victory even after such a glaring defeat.

Data Sources

The data sources for this case study fall into three main categories—autobiography, biography, and military campaign texts. The first category is the autobiographical works of Slim himself, *Defeat into Victory* and *Unofficial History*. The second category is the biographical works of Robert Lyman, Ronald Lewin, Geoffrey Evans, and Michael Calvert. The third category is Military Campaign Texts, consisting of official government reports, military correspondence, and military historical society publications.

Autobiographical

In *Defeat into Victory*, Field Marshal Slim provides a firsthand account of events in the Burmese theater of war.³⁰ As one of the only primary source documents available today, his book is extremely valuable. However, a recent article released described the requirement for extensive

²⁹ U.S. Army, *Unified Land Operations*, Army Doctrinal Publication 3-0, 9.

³⁰ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 125–46.

vetting of Slim's manuscript through governmental agencies and historical societies.³¹ In fact, the article further claimed that Field Marshal Slim's recount of events might very well have contained a biased and was even altered by the British War Department. Regardless, this study asserts that such claims of bias are immaterial. While the facts might be somewhat different than how they are depicted in Slim's autobiography, the book offers insight into what Slim's internal conversations might have sounded like. In turn, this book, along with his other *Unofficial History*, is quite useful in highlighting Slim's values and ability to reexamine the situations he faced. Additionally, although his autobiographies are useful, they both fail to establish Slim's abilities as a theoretical thinker, since it was written as more of a justification of action and tribute to those who fought, and do not focus on how he dealt with change and understanding the environment.

Biographical

Slim's biographies focus on him as a military leader who overcame extreme adversity. That Field Marshal Slim contained many of the desirable traits required for success as an Army officer is not in question. Moreover, within these texts there is taxonomy in the areas of leadership, decision making, and character. Many examples of his down-to-earth and systematic approach to dealing with men and events exist. One specific example captured in Michael Calvert's *Slim*, draws special attention to his approach to problem solving. Indeed, Calvert noted that Slim, in "[n]oticing that each exploding shell was nearer than the last...concluded that the fourth shell from then would fall into the very shadow of the rock under which his men were lying."³² In this example, Field Marshal Slim displays a simple "action, reaction" analysis of the problem, avoiding catastrophe. Other noted attributes are Slim's abilities to remain calm, retain a

³¹ David Rooney, "A Grave Injustice: Wingate and the Establishment," *History Today* 44, no. 3 (March 1994): 12.

³² Calvert, 7.

sharp analytical mind, and his in-depth study of military history.³³ These attributes bolstered his ability to evaluate crisis events and improvise, specifically during the retreat of Burma forces during the initial portion of the campaign.³⁴ Additionally, Ronald Lewin writes of Slim's ability to reflect.³⁵ This reflection allowed him to correlate and draw conclusions through analogy of historical experiences assisting in the development of successful actions required in his current situation. Many of the biographers tell wonderful stories of Slim and his leadership abilities, often citing the loyalty and affection his men held for him. However, none of them focused on Slim's ability think theoretically. This missing component is the re-occurring void found throughout all of the literature describing and discussing Field Marshal Slim and the Burmese campaign.

Military Campaign Text

The final category of literature includes historical campaign documents and publications. In these documents, most authors follow a broad approach at re-telling the chronological events throughout the Burmese and even the larger areas of the Pacific theaters of war. This inclusive approach, while valuable for the larger context and implications, seldom zooms in to the smaller facts and experiences required to establish what concepts Slim entered the war with, as well as the evolution and changes he developed and implemented after the crisis of defeat. In their book *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War*, Brian Bond and Kyoichi Tachikawa highlight Slim as a great commander, specifically due to his ability to learn.³⁶ The authors evidence their claims primarily by discussing how Slim heeded the lessons of early failure in not acting boldly, displaying this understanding through the adoption of bolder actions

³³ *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War, 1941–1945*, ed. Brian Bond and Kyoichi Tachikawa (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 40–41.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁵ Lewin, 10.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

during the latter part of the Offensive Campaign.³⁷ Although the historical accuracy of this category—consisting of official government reports, military correspondence, and military historical society publications—is excellent, these documents often lack the focused detail that highlight how Slim used theoretical thinking to assist in the development of new approaches. Nevertheless, this study draws heavily on historical documents to provide a fact-based analysis of Slim’s decision-making, and will strive to avoid the perspective bias that might permeate autobiographical and biographical accounts.

Scope

The scope of this study has four primary limitations. First, this study relies upon archived primary source and secondary source historical records, limiting the accuracy of the account to that of the archival record since the 1950’s. Second, this study employs only unclassified or declassified materials, fundamentally limiting the amount of data available for analysis. Third, this study focuses strictly on Viscount Slim’s implicit use of theoretical thinking in his campaign against the Japanese in Burma from 1942 to 1945. Fourth, this study assumes that the accounts recorded in the sources cited represent the true actions and logic of those attributed and not some form of deception or political intrigue.

Summary

The case of Field Marshall Viscount Slim, during his Burma Campaign from 1942 to 1945, is useful for understanding how thinking theoretically enhances a commander’s ability to lead effectively. First, the case addresses operational art—linking tactical actions to strategic objectives. Second, it allows a robust start-to-finish analysis of a military campaign where a single commander was present throughout the entire event. Third, this case facilitates the

³⁷ Ibid., 43.

isolation and analysis of the theater commander's use of theoretical thinking to develop and implement a novel campaign plan, solving an ill-structured problem. Consequently, studying Slim's efforts in Burma offers a model case for evaluating whether commanders implicitly combine theoretical thinking and leadership while confronting ill-structured problems.

Case Study: Slim's Burma Campaign

Introduction

Between 1939 and 1945, most of the world's attention focused on the battlefields in Eastern Europe. During this same time, however, men were also fighting in the Far East Theater of Burma. Their actions in Burma were part of the Allied Asia-Pacific Campaign to defeat the Japanese. The primary concern for Britain at the time was possible invasion by Germany. Nonetheless, Burma played an integral part in the eventual defeat of the Japanese forces and victory of the war in the Asian-Pacific Theater.

The less famous battles fought by the British forces from 1942 to 1945 in Burma hold valuable lessons for military professionals seeking to understand warfare. Whatever the merits or demerits of the British Far Eastern strategy, the Burma campaign was an important addition to the overall Allied approach to dealing with the Japanese problem. There were two key reasons that made this campaign valuable to the Allied cause. First was the fact that it maintained the strategic supply route necessary to keep China in the war. Second, it caused the Japanese to divert forces from the Pacific to assist in Burma.³⁸ The man who envisioned the victory and inspired the men of the 14th Army to achieve it was Field Marshal William Joseph Slim.

Most people know Slim as that inspirational leader; some even consider his leadership as the central component for the British victory against the Japanese.³⁹ Indeed, his ability to lead was

³⁸ Kirby, *The War against Japan: Volume II India's most Dangerous Hour*, 57.

³⁹ Toh Boon Ho, "Transforming an Army: Military Leadership and Military Transformation in the British and Indian Armies," *Journal of The Singapore Armed Forces* 32, no. 3 (2006): 64.

a necessary component for success, however, not the only one. The Burma campaign required the combined efforts of British, American, and Chinese forces working together. Slim was perhaps the one professional most capable of achieving victory as commander of the 14th Army.

His role in the Far East Theater started amidst a crisis.⁴⁰ This situation caused him to adopt a directed operational approach, based chiefly on guidance from General Alexander.⁴¹ This constrained Slim's ability to achieve his nation's strategic aims, and the combined aims of the other two Allied nations.⁴² It is in how Slim reacts and overcomes a tragic defeat that his brilliance emerges, as a leader and theoretical thinker.

While his genius in warfare is well known, little commentary exists about Slim as a theoretical thinker. His process of reflecting in action and envisioning a different future made it possible to adopt a new approach and achieve victory in Burma. The commander's ability to understand ill-structured problems and find opportunity for change is crucial for successful adaptation and problem solving.⁴³ Unfortunately, while previous authors recognized his innate and learned leadership abilities, they failed to properly identify and study Slim as a theoretical thinker who adeptly coped with the ill-structured problems he faced.⁴⁴

The remainder of this case study follows a general chronology, punctuated by the Observe, Interpret, Hypothesize, Test, and Prescribe Action theoretical framework. The first section sets the scene with important elements of the strategic context in WWII and, more specifically, within the Burmese Theater of Operation. The second section focuses on Slim's

⁴⁰ Ian Lyall Grant, and Tamayama, *Burma 1942: The Japanese Invasion* (St Martin's Square, Chichester, West Sussex: Zampi Press, 1999), 193; Lyman, 18; William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 23.

⁴¹ Eric Morris, 21.

⁴² Kirby, *The War against Japan: Volume II India's most Dangerous Hour*, 147; Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 24; Daniel P. Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes: The Indian Army in the Burma Campaign*, 72.

⁴³ U.S. Army, *The Operations Process*, Field Manual 5.0, 3-2.

⁴⁴ Geoffrey Evans, *Slim: As Military Commander* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1969); Robert Lyman, *Slim, Master of War: Burma and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (UK: Constable & Robinson Ltd,

initial observations from March to May of 1942. The third section addresses Slim's first opportunity to reflect on his initial observations—on a Calcutta hillside in Mid-May 1942—and interpret their meaning for the future. The fourth section contemplates Slim's process of hypothesizing, manifesting as training guidance for his Corps prior to the First Arakan Campaign from August 1942 to December 1942. The fifth section considers Slim's hypothesis testing, taking the form of the initial engagements of the Second Arakan Campaign from December 1943 to March 1944. Lastly, the sixth section focuses on Slim's prescription for action as he retakes the initiative in the Battle of Imphal-Kohima in March 1944 and continues the advance through the Central Burma Campaign from January to March 1945.

Strategic Context

Allied and Japanese goals heavily influenced the strategic context, shaping Slim's assumption of command in Burma. Between 1939 and 1941, the primary British goal focused on maintaining the Empire.⁴⁵ The British grand strategy pursued this goal primarily through economic means, but also through limited military engagement. With a force structure intended to police an otherwise stable global empire, the crown had to prioritize its limited resources in response to perceived threats. As a result, the British government allocated more resources for the defense of the core of the empire than the periphery, leaving Burma last in line.⁴⁶

2004); Ronald Lewin, *Slim the Standard Bearer: A Biography of Field-marshal the Viscount Slim* (London: Leo Cooper, 1990); Micheal Calvert, *Slim* (USA: Ballantine Books, 1973).

⁴⁵ Kirby, *The War against Japan: Volume II India's most Dangerous Hour*, xv.

⁴⁶ British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War, 1941-1945, ed. Brian Bond and Kyoichi Tachikawa (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 11; Ian Lyall Grant, and Tamayama, *Burma 1942: The Japanese Invasion*, 30; Walter E. Lundin, Slim's Generalship in the 1944 India-Burma Campaign (Master's thesis, Marine Corps University, 2002), 14; Alexander, *Operational Battle Command: The Doorway to Versatility*, 12.

Burma's low priority resulted in fewer resources to defend against Japanese invasion. At the outbreak of World War II, only two British battalions defended all of Burma.⁴⁷ The condition of these units was poor as they were partially trained, unorganized for combat, and maintained severe shortages of equipment.⁴⁸ In light of this and the growing threat of Japanese aggression, British Commander-in-Chief India, Sir Archibald Wavell, informed the War Office that, "Burma should be reinforced."⁴⁹

Despite Britain's mustering of an additional Division—the 17th India—their poor quality and overall lack of readiness left little chance to keep the Japanese out of Burma. Recognizing this, General Wavell decided to focus his limited means on defending the strategic objectives of Rangoon, Mandalay, and the major avenues of approach leading into Burma.⁵⁰ Upon his arrival in the Burma Theater during February 1942, Slim faced a challenging environment; a strategic aim to defend a global empire, limited means to achieve that aim in his assigned theater, and a terrain-oriented approach focused on strategic objectives.

Between 1939 and 1941, the primary Japanese goal focused on expanding the Empire, creating an "Asia for Asians."⁵¹ The Japanese grand strategy pursued this goal primarily through military means, but also through limited economic engagement.⁵² With a homeland defended by vast oceans and a force structure built to conquer, the Emperor prioritized his resources to the edges of his reach.

Unlike the British, the Japanese forces in the Burma Theater were formidable. Lieutenant-General Iida commanded the 15th Japanese Army, comprising 2 full divisions and

⁴⁷ Hickey, *The Unforgettable Army: Slim's XIVth Army in Burma*, (UK: Spellmount, 1992), 25.

⁴⁸ Kirby, *The War against Japan: Volume II India's most Dangerous Hour*, 9.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁰ Hickey, 278-79; Kirby, *The War against Japan: Volume II India's most Dangerous Hour*, 17.

⁵¹ Ian Lyall Grant, *Burma: The Turning Point* (UK: Leo Cooper, 2003), 21; Baillergeon, Field Marshal Slim and the Power of Leadership, 22.

⁵² Hickey, 34.

400 combat aircraft at the start of the offensive—with the promise of reinforcements to come.⁵³

In addition, Iida and other commanders benefited from the Japanese cultural belief in their divine Emperor.⁵⁴ This connection between a general's orders and the will of god allowed Japanese commanders like Iida to pursue bold and risky strategies, emphasizing aggression and surprise.⁵⁵

With confidence in his current resources and the expectation of more, Iida decided to focus his efforts on defeating the fielded British forces wherever they concentrated. Upon his arrival in the Burma Theater during December 1941, Lieutenant-General Iida faced a highly favorable environment; a strategic aim to expand a regional empire, generous means to achieve that aim in his assigned theater, and an enemy-oriented approach focused on rendering resistance futile. The only challenge to Iida's operation was a logistics system designed primarily to support light forces, which historically augmented their supply with that of captured enemy provisions. Under normal circumstances, Japanese tactics mitigated these conditions using surprise and exploiting rapid success on the battlefield.⁵⁶

Initial Observations: December 1941 to May 1942

On December 27, 1941, General Wavell removed General D.K. McLeod as the commander of Burma's forces due to his poor performance during the initial Japanese invasion.⁵⁷ Lieutenant General Thomas Hutton took command under Wavell's orders to, "defend Burma, particularly Rangoon, from external aggression."⁵⁸ In light of this guidance, Hutton immediately

⁵³ Ibid., 34.

⁵⁴ Geoffrey Matthews, *The Re-conquest of Burma, 1943-1945* (Aldershot, UK: Gate, 1966), 21.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 23.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁷ James Lunt, *The Retreat from Burma, 1941-1942* (London, UK: Redwood Burn Limited, 1989), 80-81.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

adopted a defensive mindset.⁵⁹ His plan was terrain-focused, with the city of Rangoon as a hub and key routes to Siam as the spokes.⁶⁰ This approach, although well within the guidance given by his superiors, failed to stop Japanese forces.

By February 1942, the Japanese had captured the Tenasserim and were rapidly approaching the Sittang River. General Hutton, appreciating the severity of the situation, attempted to divert forces south to prevent the loss of Rangoon. Hutton sought to thwart the Japanese at the Sittang bridgehead because he considered it the decisive point on the battlefield.⁶¹ After battling fiercely for several days, the 17th India Division commander, General Sir John Smyth, realized that the Japanese would soon capture the bridgehead. Smyth decided that the only way to stop the Japanese advance was to blow the bridge. This action did stop the Japanese forces, but also isolated half of his division's men and equipment on the enemy's side of the river.⁶²

Within days of losing the Sittang bridgehead, General Waveall relieved Hutton and placed General Harold Alexander in his command. On March 8, 1942, Alexander made the decision to evacuate Rangoon. During that evacuation, Allied forces still in the city were surprised to find themselves surrounded. The Japanese had established a roadblock along the Prome road, north of Taukkyan. As his forces were developing a plan to break through the obstacle, to General Alexander's surprise the roadblock dismantled itself.⁶³ This fortunate turn of events allowed Alexander to complete his withdrawal to friendly territory.

On March 13, 1942, shortly after Rangoon's fall, Slim took charge of 1st Burma Corps. General Alexander issued Slim the same guidance that Wavell had given to Hutton—to hold key

⁵⁹ Kirby, *The War against Japan: Volume II India's most Dangerous Hour*, 16.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 27-30.

⁶² Lunt, 143.

⁶³ Kirby, 27.

terrain in Central Burma at all costs.⁶⁴ Slim's Corps was to defend strategic locations; Prome and the oil fields located at Yenangyaung.⁶⁵

Reflecting upon this otherwise defensive and terrain-focused guidance, Slim set out to achieve success by attacking the enemy directly. Slim asserted that a victory against the Japanese 15th Army on the battlefield would provide the needed catalyst to halt the advancing enemy forces.⁶⁶ Even after assessing his forces available, Slim believed he could accomplish the task before him. However, Slim needed to move the 1st Burma Division to Prome as soon as possible. Then, he would be able to join forces with the Chinese forces promised by General Joseph Stillwell and Generalissimo Chang-Kai-Shek. These much-needed forces provided Slim with sufficient combat power to go on the offense. With the proper conditions set, the 1st Burma Division would be free to assume the role of a striking force.⁶⁷

Slim envisioned the enemy advancing against prepared Burmese defensive positions around Prome and Chinese positions at Toungoo. Success depended upon British and Chinese forces drawing the Japanese away from the undefended terrain of the Yomas Pegu Ranges, allowing one British division to maneuver freely. However, on March 23, 1942, Japanese air forces destroyed the Allied air forces at Maw and Akyab, effectively achieving air superiority in Burma. This loss of air coverage permitted the Japanese to attack Allied ground forces at will and limited Allied reconnaissance to land-based scouts.⁶⁸

On March 25, 1942, Slim's plan failed miserably, with the Japanese quickly dislocating both defensive positions at Prome and Toungoo and isolating the 200th Chinese Division. Adding insult to injury, Slim now had to deal with Stillwell's demands to expend all effort to extricate the

⁶⁴ Ian Lyall Grant, and Tamayama, *Burma 1942: The Japanese Invasion*, 203; Lewin, 84-85; Morris, 21.

⁶⁵ Morris, 21.

⁶⁶ Lunt, 29, 37.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

cut-off Chinese forces.⁶⁹ As Slim fought to extract the Chinese from Toungoo, General Alexander abandoned Prome and ordered the 1st Burma Corps north to defend the Yenangyaung oil fields.⁷⁰

The rapid Japanese offensive at Toungoo resulted in their securing of both sides of a bridge spanning the Sittang River. This key river crossing site gave the Japanese forces access to the Mawchi–Bawlake road and allowed the Japanese to seize two of the British strategic objectives, the village of Lashio and the Burma Road.⁷¹ The loss of Lashio cut the logistic lifeline to China and precipitated the destruction of the VI Chinese Army. In one broad and bold stroke, the Japanese effectively eliminated Chinese support to Burma operations.

April of 1942 found Slim defending a new east–west front, running from the Irrawaddy River to the village of Loikaw in the Southern Shan States. This central location provided for the defense of the Yenangyaung oil fields as well as preserving the strategic operating base at Mandalay.⁷² The area for which Slim’s 1st Burma Corps was responsible was larger than his force could reasonably defend. To make matters worse, General Alexander directed Slim to defend the village of Taungdwingyi as his top priority. If the Japanese took the village, it would completely sever contact between British and Chinese forces. Slim’s losses to this point reduced his Corps to one effective division, making defending the oilfields—in the words of Geoffrey Evans—“impossible.”⁷³

Slim’s lack of combat power prevented him from constituting a proper reserve. Consequently, he remained unable to wrest the initiative away from the Japanese. On April 14,

⁶⁸ Kirby, *The War against Japan: Volume II India's most Dangerous Hour*, 157.

⁶⁹ Lunt, 196.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 196–99.

⁷¹ Kirby, *The War against Japan: Volume II India's most Dangerous Hour*, 157.

⁷² Lyman, 31.

⁷³ Evans, 71.

1942, Slim decided to torch the Yenangyaung oil fields in support of a general retreat.⁷⁴ Shortly thereafter, General Iida's push through the Lashio corridor completed the defeat of the Chinese VI and V Armies. At this, Chang-Kai-Shek ordered his remaining forces to leave Burma and prepare to defend China proper from the expected Japanese advance.⁷⁵

With the loss of Stillwell's Chinese forces, Slim's 1st Burma Corps and elements of the 38th Chinese Division abandoned Mandalay and crossed the Irrawaddy River. The haggard formations, continually harassed by Japanese forces, had to fight a rearward advance into India. During the race to the British lines in India, Slim repeatedly thwarted Japanese attempts to envelop and destroy the 1st Burma Corps.⁷⁶

Upon reaching the banks of the Chindwin River, Slim made his last stand on the May 10, 1942. Slim needed to disrupt the Japanese offensive and gain time for his forces to complete the river crossing. Slim ordered General David Cowan, commander of the 17th Indian Division, to fire every remaining artillery shell into the oncoming Japanese columns before destroying and abandoning his guns. Cowan's artillery barrage was so savage that the Japanese advance stalled and did not pursue further. Also in Slim's favor, the end of April brought on the torrential rains of the Burmese monsoons, stymieing Japanese offensive operations and allowing the remaining Allied forces to enter India un-harassed.⁷⁷

During this Slim's first few months in theater, he made many observations important to the future of the Allied Burma Campaign. First, Slim noted that Allied land forces were unprepared for the fight they faced. One of the most glaring examples of this is the failure of the

⁷⁴ Lewin, 92.

⁷⁵ Kirby, *The War against Japan: Volume II India's most Dangerous Hour*, 208-10.

⁷⁶ E. W. Sheppard, *The Study of Military History* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Gale & Polden, 1952), 136.

⁷⁷ Evans, 208-10.

Burma defense forces to stop the Japanese at the Sittang River crossing.⁷⁸ Second, he assessed that Allied air forces were equally unprepared to fight in Burma. This was evident in the ease with which Japanese air forces gained air superiority with their attacks at Mawé and Akyab on the March 23, 1942.⁷⁹ Third, Slim observed that Allied forces appeared to have difficulty massing against conventional Japanese forces, instead distracted by the effects of the ongoing insurgency. This was evident in Allied forces being pulled away to quell Host Nation problems around Mandalay and Lashio, thereby failing to maintain the conventional area defense.⁸⁰

Fourth, Slim noted that Allied forces tended to restrict themselves to roads, whereas the Japanese moved freely through the jungle. One of the most glaring examples of this was when General Alexander's forces found their retreat routes blocked during the evacuation of Rangoon.⁸¹ This compliments Slim's fifth observation, as he assessed that the Japanese show-up in unexpected places. This was evident in the manner in which the Japanese successfully isolated the 200th Chinese Division at Toungoo.⁸² Sixth, Slim observed that the Japanese forces focused more on destroying Allied forces than taking Burmese ground. This preference revealed itself in the way the Japanese continued to pursue Allied forces with maximum effort, leaving key terrain such as Rangoon and Mandalay vulnerable.⁸³

Seventh, Slim noted that the Japanese tended to favor turning movements along roads. This "hook" and road block tactic manifest repeated throughout Slim's first days.⁸⁴ Eighth, he

⁷⁸ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 115; Kirby, *The War against Japan: Volume II India's most Dangerous Hour*, 12.

⁷⁹ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 116; Calvert, 34.

⁸⁰ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 116; Lunt, 201.

⁸¹ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 117; Kirby, *The War against Japan: Volume II India's most Dangerous Hour*, 97.

⁸² Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 118; Louis Allen, *Burma: The Longest War, 1941-1945* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 62-63.

⁸³ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 118; Evans, 79.

⁸⁴ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 118; Lyman, 29.

assessed that the Allied forces suffered from generally low morale. This condition was obvious in the dejected state in which his 1st Burma Corps arrived in India.⁸⁵ Ninth, Slim observed that the Japanese—when surprised—were slow to react and generally less effective as a unit. When the Allies disrupted Japanese plans, they often showed themselves to be poor in innovating at the tactical level.⁸⁶ This was evident in the Japanese failure to exploit success at Rangoon when they had already blocked General Alexander’s command from escape with an established roadblock. These general observations, over the first months of Slim’s time in Burma mark the beginning of his implicit process of theoretical thinking.

A Calcutta Hillside: Mid-May 1942

In the wake of bitter defeat, Slim used the relief provided by the monsoon season to reflect and interpret what had just happened.⁸⁷ Sitting on a hill in Calcutta, he pondered upon the observations he had made over the previous 70 days and considered how they may have contributed to the 1st Burma Corps defeat and retreat into India. The first two observations he considered focused on the lack of military preparation for both the land and air forces. In particular, Slim saw the unprepared air forces as his “greatest single handicap,” resulting in a lack of actionable intelligence on the enemy forces. He attributed this lack of preparation to poor equipment, under-manning, and poor training.⁸⁸ This interpretation suggests that Slim faced an organizational problem with the Burma Defense Force.

Slim’s third observation focused on the insufficiency of Allied forces when dealing with an insurgency concurrently with a conventionally enemy. He interpreted this insufficiency as a lack of support from the Burmese population in dealing with the insurgency coupled with an

⁸⁵ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 121.

⁸⁶ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 535-51.

⁸⁷ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 113-15.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 115.

already limited Allied conventional force.⁸⁹ His fourth observation considered the British dependence on roads. Slim interpreted this reliance as primarily a general lack of familiarity with jungle operations and reliance on a motorized supply system.⁹⁰ These interpretations reinforced the notion that Slim faced an organizational problem.

His fifth and seventh observations considered the way the Japanese forces showing-up in unexpected places and consistently used turning movements. Slim surmised that this alluded to a Japanese recognition of the British vulnerability regarding Jungle and roads.⁹¹ The sixth observation Slim considered was the Japanese Army's force-focused approach. Slim supposed that this tendency belied the Japanese objectives.⁹² These three interpretations show a movement from a purely organizational problem to a problem of approach as well.

Slim's eighth observation considered the low morale of his Allied forces. He attributed this morale to the nebulous vision the Allied High Command maintained of what the Burma campaign was supposed to accomplish.⁹³ His ninth observation considered the failure of the Japanese forces to react well to the unexpected. Slim supposed that this lack of initiative resulted from a culturally rigid system of Japanese command and control.⁹⁴ These interpretations, taken together, strongly suggest that Slim faced a problem not only with his organization, but with the overall approach as well. Using Slim's interpretations as a guide, the author asserts that Slim was dealing with not just one problem, but with two interrelated problems consisting of an inadequate approach and an organization incapable of executing any approach.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 116

⁹⁰ Ibid., 117.

⁹¹ Ibid., 118.

⁹² Ibid. 118-121.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 119; Kirby, *The War against Japan: Volume II India's most Dangerous Hour*, 97.

Slim, reflecting upon his observations from recent events, moved forward emphasizing the fact that a “general had to stamp on the failures of the past and remember only the lessons to be learnt from defeat—they are more than victory.”⁹⁵ This idea of moving past failure, combined with his analysis, formed the basis for Slim’s development of hypotheses on how the Allied and Japanese organizations related to one another, and how he might adopt an approach that promoted favorable interaction in the future.

Training for the First Arakan Campaign: August to December 1942

Slim’s hypotheses for solving his two problems manifested in the form of training guidance for the 15th Corps in preparation for the First Arakan Campaign. Using a training-based approach, he could strengthen the 15th Corps ability to fight. Shaping the organization and its behavior to address the observations gleaned from his defeat. Based on his understanding of previous experiences, Slim drafted a one-page memorandum to guide his unit’s training, containing the following tenets:

1. The individual soldier must learn, by living, moving and exercising in it, that the jungle is neither impenetrable nor unfriendly. When he has once learned to move and to live in it, he can use it for concealment, to covered movement, and surprise.
2. Patrolling is the master key to jungle fighting. All units, not only infantry battalions, must learn to patrol in the jungle, boldly, widely, cunningly, and offensively.
3. All units must get used to having Japanese parties in their rear, and, when this happens, regard not themselves, but the Japanese, as ‘surrounded’.
4. In defence, no attempt should be made to hold long continuous lines. Avenues of approach must be covered and enemy penetration between our posts dealt with at one by mobile local reserves who have completely reconnoitered the country.
5. There should rarely be frontal attacks and never fontal attacks on narrow fronts. Attacks should follow hooks and come in from flank or rear, while pressure holds the enemy front.
6. Tanks can be used in almost any country except swamp. In close country they must always have infantry with them to defend and reconnoiter for them. They should always

⁹⁵ Lyman, 70.

be used in the maximum numbers available and capable of being deployed. Whenever possible penny packets must be avoided. 'The more you use, the fewer you lose.'

7. There are no non-combatants in jungle warfare. Every unit and sub-unit, including medical one, is responsible for its all-round protection, including patrolling, at all times.

8. If the Japanese are allowed to hold the initiative, they are formidable. When we have it, they are confused and easy to kill. By mobility away from roads, surprise and offensive action we must regain and keep the initiative.⁹⁶

These eight tenets fall into two main categories—organizational changes and approach changes. The first seven tenets sought to solve organizational problems, preventing the 15th Corps from having the same issues as the Burma Defense force. This new force would be more competent and thereby more confident on the field of battle with the Japanese. The eighth tenet sought to address the issue of an inadequate operational approach. This new approach would use the very tactics the Japanese used against them, turning the Japanese Army's strengths into weaknesses. Slim's appreciation for the change occurring in his Corps manifest in his own words:

As I went from division to division and saw their keenness, their toughness, their jungle-craft, and their speed of movement, I began to feel that, when the time came, we should live up to the 15th Corps sign of the three V's, for fifteen and victory.⁹⁷

These tenets of training guidance—hypotheses for victory—still required testing and Slim's 15th Corps was going to get their chance. In July 1942, Grand Headquarters India ordered an Arakan offensive to clear the enemy out of the Mayu peninsula and take Akyab. In anticipation of the order, Slim developed three possible approaches: a direct approach involving attacking straight down the peninsula; a mixed approach using minor amphibious assaults 15th Corps would "hook" in behind the Japanese using successive operations to advance; and an indirect approach using a long-range penetration expedition to seize Akyab by the back door.⁹⁸ In the end, however, Slim never got the chance to test any of the three new approaches himself.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 142-43.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 146.

⁹⁸ This final approach was similar to that for which the Chindits were preparing. Ibid., 163.

Instead, the Army commander, Lieutenant-General Noel Irwin, chose to personally control the First Arakan offensive, issuing his plan directly to the 14th Division commander General Wilfred Llyod.⁹⁹ As the campaign went on, things moved from bad to worse, eventually resulting in General Lloyd's relief and replacement by General Cyril Lomax. When the fight appeared all but lost, Irwin relented and sent Slim in to assist Lomax in salvaging the campaign. Together, Slim and Lomax ended the First Arakan Campaign where it started, with no Allied objectives achieved. The entire First Arakan debacle resulted in Lieutenant-General Irwin attempting to relieve Slim, but accomplished little but getting himself relieved and Slim promoted to Army commander.¹⁰⁰

The Second Arakan Campaign: December 1943 to March 1944

In October 1943, Slim assumed command of the Eastern Army, later renamed the Fourteenth Army. He immediately entered into the same type of commander's assessment he did in the past, reviewing the headquarters staff and circulating the battlefield to get a feel for his subordinate units. Completing the assessment Slim again realized he did not have an organization capable of defeating the Japanese. There were critical logistical shortcomings, specifically transportation, supply, and major medical support problems. Lastly, the morale issue he had originally observed within the 1st Burma Corps was Army-wide.¹⁰¹ If Slim could not develop a functioning organization built on a fierce offensive spirit, he would be unable to achieve the 14th Army's overall operational object—destroying the Japanese Army in Burma.¹⁰²

Realizing the need to create a major paradigm shift inside the 14th Army, Slim sought to overcome or at least to mitigate each of the four obstacles he assessed. Working through a highly

⁹⁹ Morris, 22.

¹⁰⁰ Lewin, 124.

¹⁰¹ Evans, 106.

¹⁰² Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 183.

competent subordinate, Major General Alfred Snelling and securing acknowledgement of the material shortages from his higher command, Slim made changes. He prioritized logistical efforts, developing a more efficient transportation system, using civilian labor support, and employing American rail units. Additionally, he supported Snelling by allowing him to build a core organization of specialists to work under him and empowered Snelling to act as he deemed necessary.¹⁰³

Next, to overcome the medical issues, Slim implemented strict field hygiene standards and supervised the administration of anti-Malaria medications. Additionally, he positioned treatment units forward, drastically cutting the amount of time sick soldiers spent away from their units.¹⁰⁴ Slim tackled the issue of morale in the Army along three lines of effort. First, *Spiritual*—each man needed to feel what he did contributes to a larger objective. Second, *Intellectual*—each man must have confidence in his leadership, the unit, and that the objective is attainable. Third, *Material*—each man must have adequate resources such as weapons, equipment, living conditions, and that his command is seeking to provide this.¹⁰⁵

Slim affected change in unit morale using similar tactics he used previously in the 15th Corps. He met with units and shared his vision at every opportunity. Slim encouraged each of his subordinate commander to have their own informal talks, emphasizing Slim's message. Fundamentally, "All he did now was to encourage his commanders to increase these activities, unite them [the men] in a common approach to the problem...."¹⁰⁶

The next challenge Slim faced was to generate success on the battlefield. He emphasized the use of jungle patrolling and overwhelming force against Japanese. The small victories of November 1943 paid off, generating a sense of accomplishment and individual confidence in the

¹⁰³ Ibid., 172-76.

¹⁰⁴ Matthews, 15.

¹⁰⁵ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 182-83.

frontline troops.¹⁰⁷ The last hurdle to overcoming the morale issue laid in the development of a self-made army, as captured in Slim's unofficial motto "God helps those who help themselves."¹⁰⁸ Having solved the organizational issues his Army faced, Slim now turned his theoretical thoughts to destroying the Japanese Army in Burma.

Slim's new approach comprised the observations, interpretations, and hypotheses of the previous two-years. Realizing the need for an organization capable of offensive action, Slim struggled on, but eventually created just such an organization. By the opening battles of the Second Arakan Campaign, Slim had two full Corps—the 15th and 4th—consisting of six divisions, one armored brigade, and the 221st Royal Air Force group.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, due to personality conflicts elsewhere in the theater, Slim received operational control over Stilwell's forces throughout the initial portion of the 1943-1954 campaign.¹¹⁰

Slim finally had what he needed to be successful. First, he had a competent and confident Army. Second, he had personal knowledge of the terrain and weather conditions in Burma. Third, he had an experiential understanding of enemy tactics and vulnerabilities. Fourth, he had the force multiplication from the incorporation of the Royal Air Force into his formation. From these components, Slim noted four guiding principles he would use to plan operations. These planning principles were:

The ultimate intention [of an operation] must be an offensive one. The main idea on which the plan was based must be simple. That idea must be held in view throughout and everything else must give way to it. The plan must have in it an element of surprise.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 183, 184.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 189.

¹⁰⁸ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 194.

¹⁰⁹ M. R. Roberts, "The Campaign in Burma, 1943-45: Part-I the Turn of The tide and the Decisive Battles," *Royal United Service Institution* CI, no. 602 (Spring 1956): 237.

¹¹⁰ Matthews, 10.

¹¹¹ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 209.

The author asserts that these principles are a clear example of Slim's appreciation for leadership, as noted in the first three principles, and a new approach, as noted in the last. This suggests an implicit understanding of the interaction needed at the operational level between leadership and theoretical thinking to generate success. Interestingly, that final principal refines Slim's interpretation of the Japanese style of fighting, focusing on his understanding of their most critical vulnerability. With his new organization and their vision of his new approach, Slim could exploit the Japanese tendency to overextend themselves during their penetration and "hooking" maneuver, thereby orchestrating an Allied turning movement at the operational level.

Slim would use an indirect approach to defeat the Japanese Army by severing their logistical tail. In order to do this, Slim directed that in circumstances where 14th Army units found themselves cut-off, they should turn their positions into strongpoints. Furthermore, these encircled units should send out patrols to maintain pressure on the Japanese supply-lines.¹¹² Slim envisioned his strongpoint technique as the key to turning the Japanese enveloping force into the force surrounded.

To mitigate the risk of his own forces culminating from loss of supply lines, Slim planned extensive use of aerial resupply to ensure that encircled Allied units remained combat effective.¹¹³ Slim correctly interpreted the Japanese dependence on captured Allied supplies. Sustained conflict between Allied and Japanese forces, while simultaneously severing enemy supply lines, forced the Japanese units in contact to culminate rapidly.¹¹⁴ Slim concluded that his Army,

¹¹² William Joseph Slim, *After Action Report (AAR) of the 14th Army* (This original document is located in the 3rd floor of CARL Library, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, 1945)., 2.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 3.

employed with deference to maneuver and surprise, would deliver a “shock to the Japanese system.” This “Operational Shock” would spell the defeat of Japanese forces in Burma.¹¹⁵

In November 1943, Slim took the opportunity to test this new theory for defeating the Japanese, using the 15th Corps to attack into the Arakan again. For this second attempt, Slim directed Lieutenant General Alexander Christison to “to execute a limited advance down the Mayu Peninsula to secure: (a) the little port of Maungdaw, [and] (b) the main lateral across the Mayu Range—the Maungdaw Buthidaung Road.” Securing these objectives provided Slim the opportunity to supply his most forward units by sea.¹¹⁶

The attack made headway into the Arakan throughout December and into January 1944. However, in early February, Japanese forces attacked along an exposed left flank of 15th Corps, cutting Christianson’s 7th Division off from resupply and threatening their complete destruction. It was here, after the Japanese successfully isolated the 7th Division, that Slim tested his new approach. At this point, The Christianson’s units depended solely upon aerial re-supply to prevent culmination.¹¹⁷

The Japanese, realizing that the British were not acting as they had in the past, focused wholly on the destruction of the 7th Indian Division. By February 14, 1944, the Japanese commander, General Sakuria, recognized that his supplies were critically low. It was in this moment that the Japanese, in desperation, attempted a full-on frontal assault against the 7th Division. When this failed, it was only a matter of days until the Japanese supply system

¹¹⁵ Operational Shock for the purpose of this monograph is defined as the ability to disrupt a system in such a way that the system cannot adapt and the results are a complete failure and breakdown. For further discussion on the topic of Operational Shock, see the following text. Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (New York, NY: Frank Cass Publishers, 1997), 6; Richard W. Harrison, *Architect of Soviet Victory in World War II: The Life and Theories of G.S. Isserson* (London: McFarland and Company, 1952), 67-68.

¹¹⁶ Matthews, 26.

¹¹⁷ Slim, *After Action Report (AAR) of the 14th Army*, 2.

succumbed to Allied air power and poor road conditions. Without consistent logistical support, the Japanese resistance in the Arakan soon ended.¹¹⁸

The success of 15th Corps in the Second Arakan offensive had two immediate effects. First, the myth of an invincible Japanese soldier no longer harried Allied soldiers. Second, Slim's new approach worked—using maneuver and surprise against the rigid Japanese forces delivered a crushing shock to their system. Thus, setting the stage for the destruction of all Japanese forces in Burma.

Retaking the Initiative: March 1944 to March 1945

Using the Second Arakan Campaign as the template for success, Slim now sought to prescribe action by drawing the Japanese into a decisive battle along the central front. His plan for the re-conquest of Burma was to be straightforward and clever. He planned to destroy the enemy on the ground of his choosing. To accomplish this he would feint to the Chindwin, provoking the Japanese and then relocating back to the designated engagement area. It was in this prepared location that he would maneuver and leverage Allied air and armor forces to surprise the enemy. Once more, Slim sought to induce operational shock to the Japanese system.

Considering that the Japanese were in the midst of planning a spring offensive, Slim's plan was a success. However, the opening rounds went to the Japanese. By the end of March 1944, the 4th Corps was isolated and wholly dependent on aerial re-supply to prevent its culmination. Slim's ability to sustain his forces over the next three months proved critical to the outcome of the battle. By May the enemy, critically low on supplies and unable to secure them through Allied defeat, "launched suicide attacks in a last effort to achieve their original objectives

¹¹⁸ Matthews, 26, 31-32.

[of seizing the British supply dumps located on the Imphal Plain]. Such tactics played right into Slim's hands, and the Japanese 33rd Division was almost entirely destroyed.”¹¹⁹

Over a four-month period, Slim used several methods to induce Operational Shock in the Japanese forces at the battle of Imphal-Kohima. First, Slim created depth by using strongpoints and combat patrols from the encircled 4th Corps. Next, Slim prevented culmination of his forces, using aerial re-supply. Operation Stamina pushed over 19,000 tons of supplies to the besieged units and evacuated over 56,000 personnel. Additionally, Slim used his air-mindedness to shift reinforcements around the battlefield, creating opportunities through increased reach, simultaneity, and depth.¹²⁰

Simultaneously, Slim leveraged the effects of Orde Wingate's deep striking Chindits organization. In early March 1944, the Chindits conducted airborne operations with three goals: support the advance of Stilwell's forces by cutting the 18th Japanese Division's LOCs; encourage Chaing-Kai-Shek to send more forces; and create confusion in the Japanese rear area. It was this last effect that Slim sought to leverage most in his operation.¹²¹ Slim's understanding of the Japanese response to his approach proved extremely accurate. The defeat of the invading Japanese force left Slim well positioned to seize the initiative in Burma.

Following the Battle of Imphal-Kohima, Slim moved on to the battle for central Burma.¹²² The battles for Miektla and Mandalay required the Allies to cross the Irrawaddy River. In order to continue shocking the Japanese system, Slim planned the river crossing with deception at the heart of his actions. Slim maintained a decoy 4th Corps Headquarters at a northern crossing point, presenting indications to General Kimura's forces that suggested the entire Corps was

¹¹⁹ Morris, 28.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Matthews, 51.

¹²² Ibid., 78.

there. Next, Slim phased his units' crossing plan in such a way as to reinforce this 4th Corps' deception.

Kimura's forces were caught unaware by Slim's use of the actual 4th Corps as a breakout force in the isolation and capture of Miektla. Miektla represented the decisive point for the central Burma operation, one from which the Japanese could never recover. It was the advanced supply base for all Japanese forces in central Burma and hub for all communications between central and northern Burma. By capturing Miektla, Slim had effectively crippled the Japanese defense of central Burma, ensuring victory for the Allied forces. All that remained was the recapture of Rangoon.¹²³

Again, Slim had achieved Operational Shock against the enemy. Using maneuver and surprise, the 4th Corp's actions disrupted the Japanese plan. Once again, the enemy's rigidity and inability to adapt resulted in their downfall. Slim continued to reinforce success by incorporating aerial resupply and movement into subsequent operations. Additionally, Allied air forces played an important role in deception by limiting enemy reconnaissance. Slim's ability to think theoretically—to *observe, interpret, hypothesize, test, and prescribe action*—allowed him to develop a successful approach to defeating the Japanese in Burma by delivering Operational Shock to their system.

Conclusions

Findings

The historical records of the Burma Campaign in concert with the *Observe, Interpret, Hypothesize, Test, and Prescribe Action* theoretical framework provides a good case from which to answer this study's research questions. The first of which was—*what observations did Slim make about his situation?* Based upon the influence of military thought at the time, the author

¹²³ Ibid., 73.

hypothesized that Slim likely made observations, including the condition of his own organization, the proficiency of the enemy, and the effects of the environment on all forces. During his three-month retreat from Burma Slim observed these things, but also noted the effects of counter-insurgency distractions on his conventional fight, his lack of freedom of maneuver as compared to the Jungle-aware Japanese, and the tendencies of the Japanese to fight in a particularly rigid fashion

The second question was—*how did Slim go about interpreting those observations?* The author hypothesized that Slim likely interpreted the different relationships between the Japanese and Allied soldiers and the jungle environment. In actuality, he interpreted his observations as being symptoms of an inadequate operational approach and an insufficient organization to execute any approach. Though this may seem like somewhat of an over simplification of Slim's thoughts, it does provide remarkable focus for how he proceeds.

The third question was—*what hypothesis or model did Slim develop from that interpretation?* At the beginning of this study, the author suggested that Slim likely hypothesized that improving his own organization's administrative capabilities and relationship to the jungle environment would have positive impact on his ability to take the fight to the Japanese. In fact, Slim developed his hypothesis around just such an approach. After assessing the 15th Corps, Slim's training guidance contained seven of eight tenets that sought to overcome organizational challenges and one tenet designed to address his problem of a new approach. In training, Slim incorporated the effects of aerial resupply and deception into his hypotheses as well.

The fourth question was—*how did Slim test his hypothesis?* The author originally considered that to test the hypothesis, Slim would likely restructure his organization to improve administrative and operational function, setting favorable conditions for offensive action against the Japanese. The early successes of the Second Arakan Campaign demonstrated Slim's changes in combat. He now had the right organization and the right approach.

The fifth question was— *what actions did Slim prescribe from the results of his tests?* The author originally posited that after successful testing of his hypothesis, Slim would likely prescribe additional organizational reform to continue to increase operational efficiency and effectiveness. With the full weight of the 14th Army, Slim continued to refine his organization and approach, delivering operational shock to the enemy through maneuver and surprise.

Through the combination of the case study and theoretical framework provided here, the author asserts that Field Marshall Viscount Slim was truly a military genius—not based solely upon an assessment of his leadership, but on an appreciation for his ability to think theoretically and lead his men through the dramatic changes necessary to apply a new operational approach. Slim’s theoretical thinking occurred, not explicitly like a professional theorist, but implicitly as a military commander trying to make sense of an ill-structured problem. The *Observe, Interpret, Hypothesize, Test, and Prescribe Action* theoretical framework allows the onlooker, be he academic or soldier, to identify and examine theoretical thinking in action.

Implications

The case study of Field Marshal Slim demonstrates how successful military commanders need leadership and theoretical thinking. Looking at current Army doctrine we see how it attributes leadership to commanders as an ability, but leaves theoretical thinking as an activity supported by staffs. If commanders fail to think theoretically and their staffs do not apply, solid conceptual planning—the implication is that the operational plan has less of a chance to succeed. Additionally, operational and strategic leader development programs may benefit dramatically through the incorporation of theoretical thinking instruction. By emphasizing theoretical thinking curriculum in the Officer Education System throughout the life of our leaders professional education cycle—suggests an overall improvement in operational and strategic commanders abilities—through the results of this case study.

Recommendations for Further Research

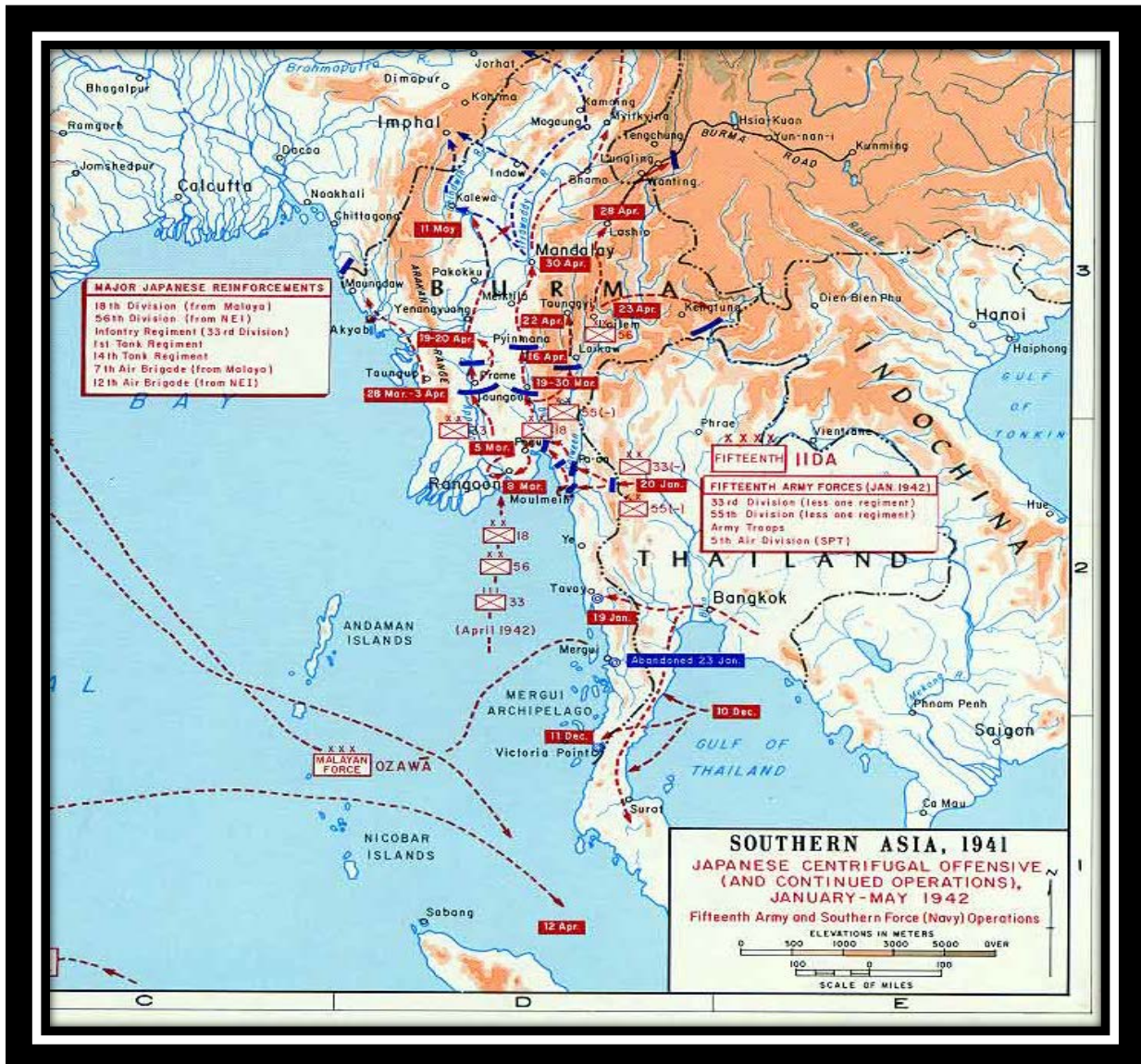
This study is notably limited to a single case study to establish the plausibility of identifying implicit theoretical thinking and making that implicit process explicit through the author's *Observe, Interpret, Hypothesize, Test, and Prescribe Action* model. The field would benefit greatly from the application of this model across a wide variety of cases, including conventional, counter-insurgency, and stability operations. Additionally, in areas outside of the model, the U.S. Army may benefit by conducting research into how the development and implementations of theoretical thinking tools, skills, and abilities are incorporated into the operational force. Finally, this study did not look at the role culture plays in theoretical thinking, an in-depth analysis on how culture influences theoretical thinking bears scrutinizing. Did the British way of life or the fact Slim served the majority of his military service in India positively or negatively impact the way he used theoretical thinking?

Summary

In summary, this monograph sought to answer questions about Field Marshal Slim's ability to develop a new operational approach through thinking theoretically. By developing a framework for theoretical thinking based on extant theories, the author established criteria for turning Slim's implicit theoretical thinking into explicit theoretical action. The *Observe, Interpret, Hypothesize, Test, and Prescribe Action* model demonstrates / reveals that Field Marshal Slim used theoretical thinking to overcome the organizational and operational approach problems he faced on the battlefield. This proves that Field Marshal Slim was a leader and theorist, capable of identifying problems in his organization and approach, and leading his men through the changes necessary to defeat the Japanese in Burma.

Appendix A:

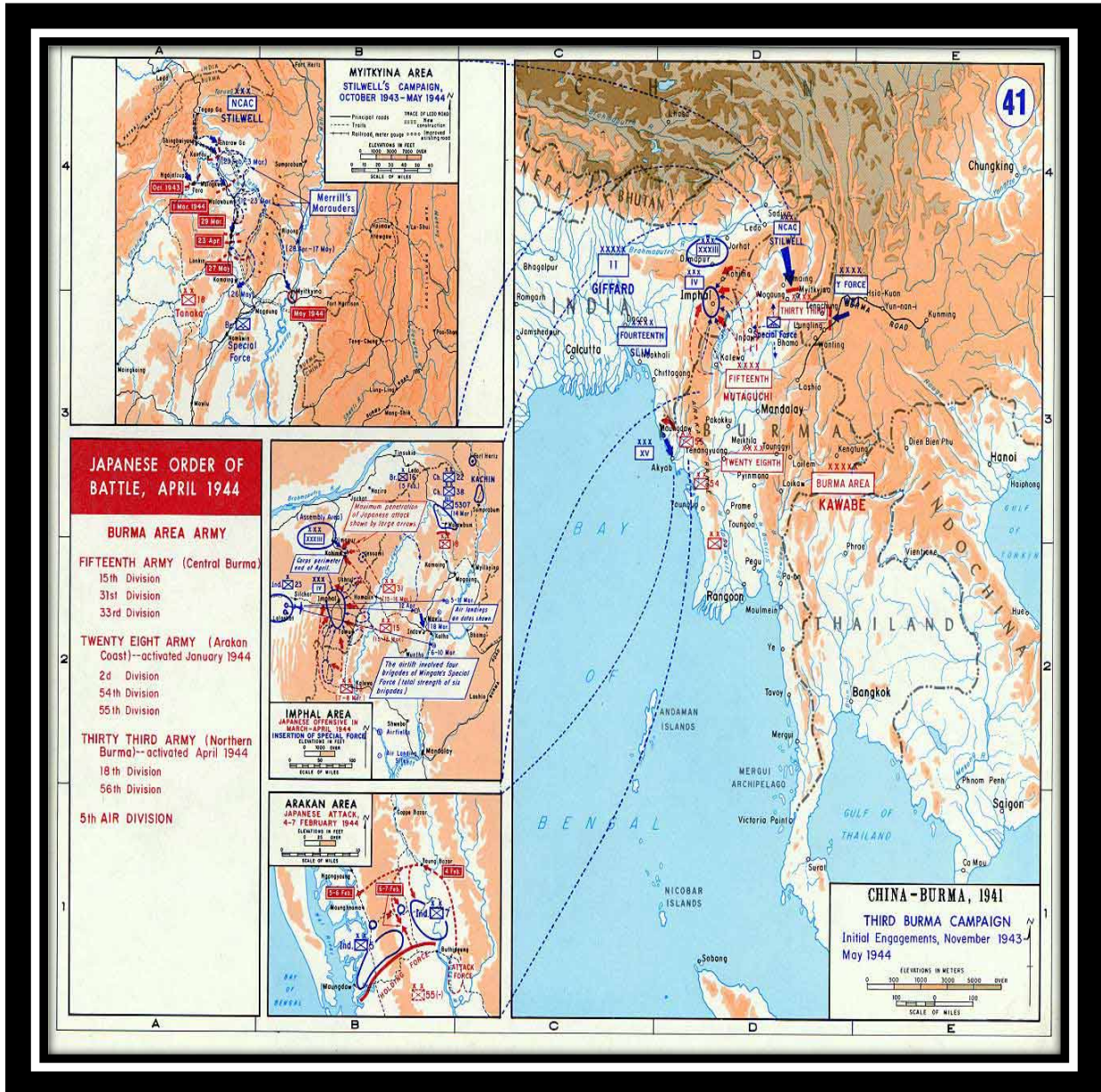
Burma 1941 Japanese Offensive and Allied Retreat¹²⁴



¹²⁴ West Point History Department, World War Two Asia Pacific: Burma, <http://www.dean.usma.edu/departments/history/Atlases/WorldWarTwoAsia/WorldWarTwoAsia.html> (accessed March 26, 2012).

Appendix B:

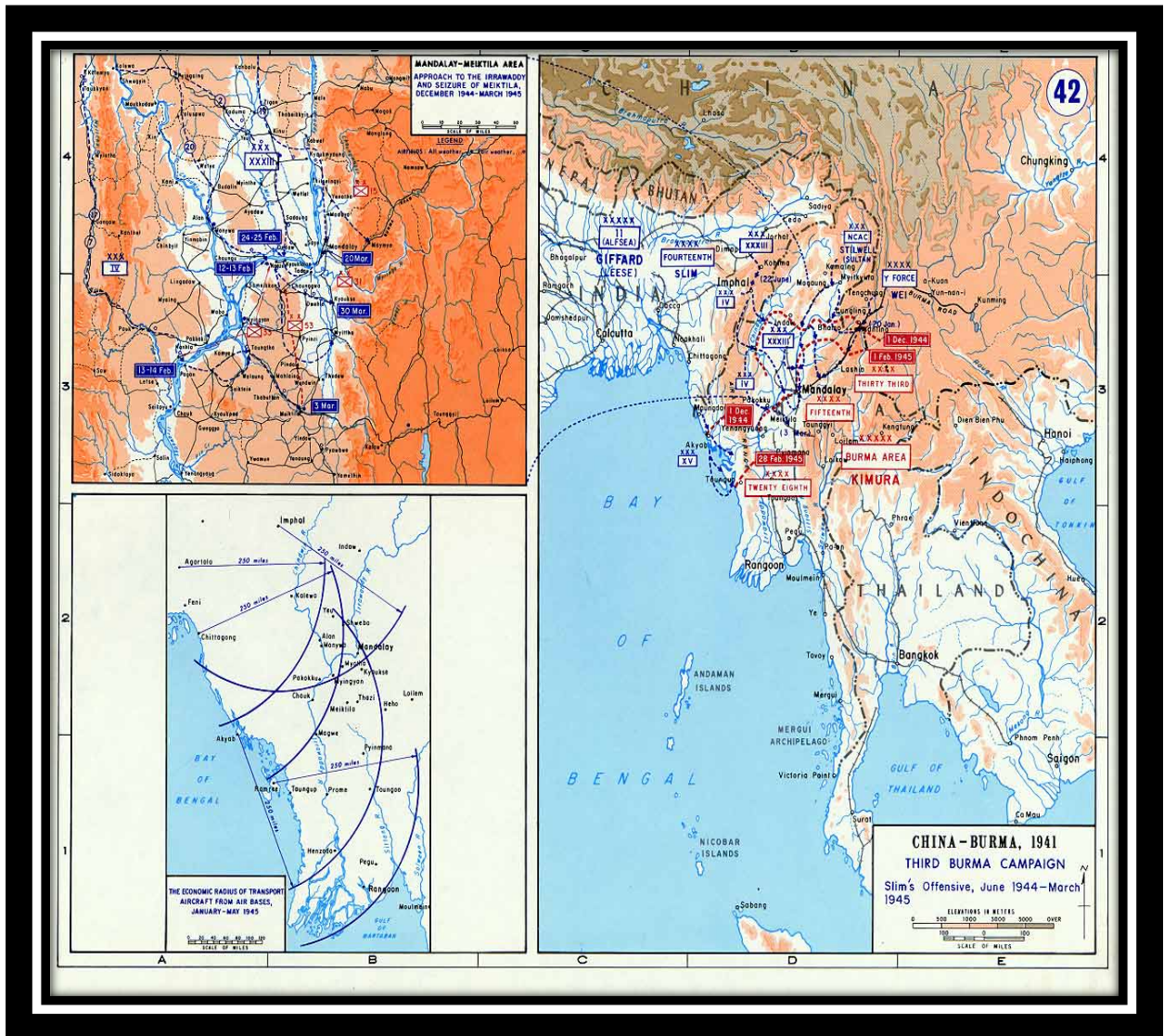
Burma November 1943– May 1944¹²⁵



¹²⁵ Ibid.

Appendix C:

Burma June 1944– March 1945¹²⁶



¹²⁶ Ibid.

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